DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 375 988 RC 019 626

AUTHOR	Lawton, Millicent
TITLE	Hanging Tough.
REPORT NO	ISSN-0277-4232
PUB DATE	9 Feb 94
NOTE	8p.; Reformatted from original discontinuous journal article publication.
PUB TYPE	Journal Articles (080)
JOURNAL CIT	Education Week; v13 n20 p26-30 Feb 9 1994
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	*Consolidated Schools; Educational Equity (Finance); Elementary Secondary Education; Property Taxes; *Rural Schools; School Community Relationship; *School Districts; *School Funds; Small Schools; *State Legislation; *State School District Relationship
IDENTIFIERS	*Oregon; Perrydale School District OR; Small School Districts

ABSTRACT

In rural Oregon, the one-school, 240-student K-12 Perrydale school district faces the possibility of consolidation with another school district. Oregon's Ballot Measure 5, passed in 1991, reduced property taxes to equally low levels around the state, drying up much of the locally raised money that is the lifeblood of school districts. In addition to Measure 5, legislators passed school-reform legislation mandating provisions that are costly to rural school districts. Perrydale will see its revenue shrink by 24 percent in the 1993-94 school year, and even more in the 1994-95 school year. By the 1995-96 school year, Perrydale will be essentially bankrupt. However, under the direction of superintendent/principal Tim Adsit, the board of education has devised creative ways to increase revenue. The proposals range from welcoming boarding students from other districts to creating a parks-and-recreation district to take over such programs as sports and art. State voters rejected a measure pushed by parent groups to institute a 5 percent sales tax that would replace school funds lost in property taxes. Teachers in Perrydale are already feeling the declining revenues with outdated textbooks, fewer field trips, and smaller library budgets. Despite the hardships, the community is reluctant to give up the sense of family and the solid education offered at the small school. (KS)

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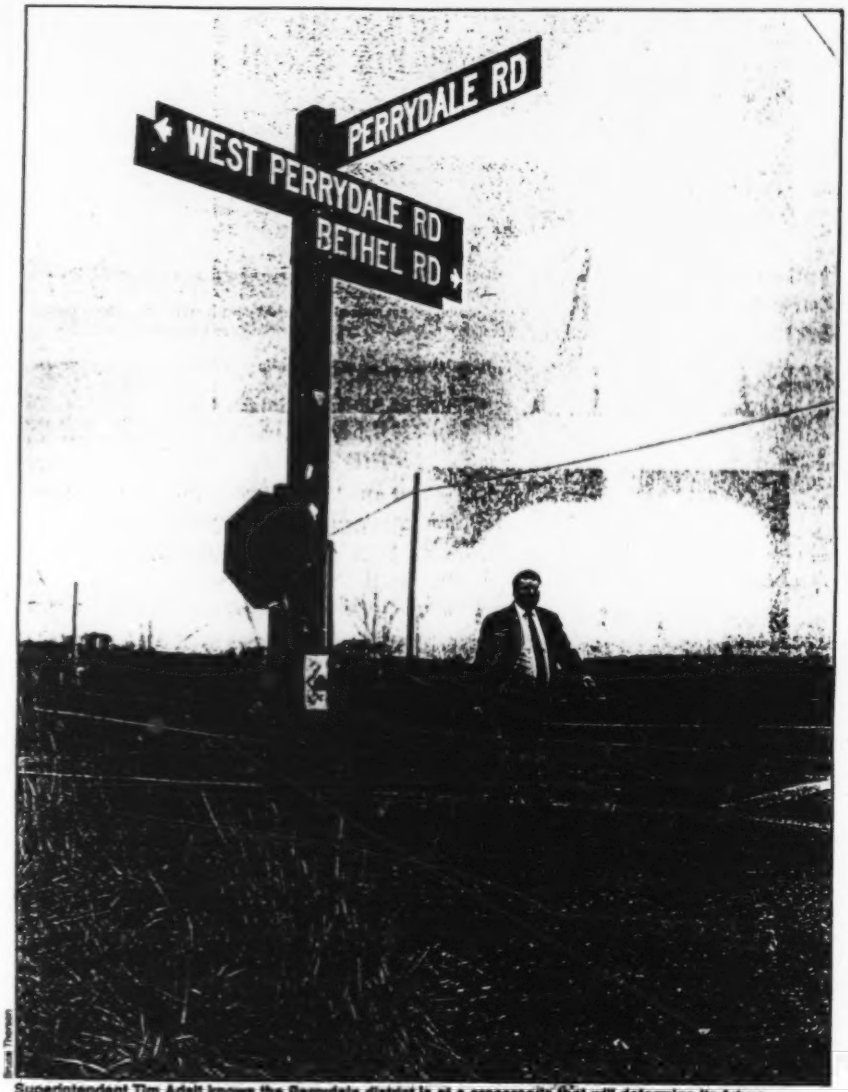

Bruce Thorson

Superintendent Tim Adalt knows the Perrydale district is at a crossroads that will determine its future.

Caught between shrinking property taxes and an ambitious education-reform agenda, a one-school district is fighting for its survival.

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Hanging Tough

By Millicent Lawton

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As you make the 25-mile drive from Oregon's capital of Salem west across the Willamette Valley toward Perrydale, the Douglas firs that stand like dark-green sentries on the hillsides begin to give way to open farmland.

Just about the time the flats become more rolling, the outline of the foothills of the Coast Range Mountains breaks through the low, moisture-laden clouds.

This is where the turn for Perrydale comes.

The two-lane ribbon of Perrydale Road and the parallel parade of electric-line poles are the only interruption to the acres of fields, some green with young winter wheat, and the scattered houses and farm buildings.

Five miles down the road, the only clue to an upcoming settlement is the somewhat denser array of buildings—a large Victorian house, a modest clapboard church, and, finally, the white, bungalow-style school building.

Those landmarks pinpoint the lone intersection that is Perrydale.

This crossroads merits traffic control no more strict than stop signs. Not one retail business enlivens the hamlet—not a gas station, not a 7-Eleven. The nearest post office is seven miles away.

There used to be more commerce here. A feed-and-seed mill and store burned down just a couple of years ago. Lots of other local features are only history, too: the passenger railroad, a hotel, saloons, the wooden sidewalks, hardware and drug stores, grocery stores.

Today, the heart of the Perrydale economy is the farms that grow grass seed, wheat, cherries, and filberts; a road contractor; and the 27-employee school district.

For well over 100 years, despite its changing fortunes, the school has been this community's constant.

The first Perrydale school even predates the arrival of the railroad and the establishment of the town itself, in 1878; it opened in 1870, just 11 years after Oregon became the 33rd state.

In Perrydale, as in other hamlets and small towns, the school is a hub of activity. The varsity basketball games draw a crowd that loads the bleachers in the smaller-than-regulation gymnasium to groaning and pushes the indoor mercury to 80 degrees.

The gym becomes a polling place for the 500 or so registered voters in the area and a community hall when clans gather for reunions or to celebrate a baby or bridal shower.

Despite its longtime prominence at this intersection, the one-school, 240-student K-12 Perrydale school district now stands at another kind of crossroads, one that will decide its very existence.

Like many other small rural school districts around the country, Perrydale is struggling to hang on. But unlike districts in other states, it is not being pressured to close by a state policy of consolidating small districts into larger ones that offer more economies of scale.

Instead, Perrydale is one of the many accidental victims of discontented taxpayers who four years ago approved a sweeping property-tax-limitation measure.

Ballot Measure 5, a law similar to California's Proposition 13, ratchets down property taxes to equally low levels around the state, drying up much of the locally raised money that is the lifeblood of school districts.

Larger districts, whose per-pupil costs tend to be lower anyway, may be able to trim staff and programs to cope. Portland, for example, is looking at eliminating elementary music and physical education and 231 teaching positions districtwide to trim $25 million from its budget.

But in an already-lean operation like Perrydale's, the loss of one teacher can mean the end of five or six different courses.

If Perrydale managed to turn the other cheek after the initial blow aimed by Measure 5, it suffered a hard slap on the other side when legislators in 1991 passed ambitious school-reform legislation that phases in over several years. Among other provisions, the legislation calls for a longer school year and instruction by 1997 in six broadly defined occupation tracks.

For Perrydale, the next two years are critical.

During this school year and next, the district, which has an annual budget of $1.45 million, will see its revenues

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"The board is made up of hard-headed, tough-minded farmers. We've all seen tough times, and we just roll up our sleeves and make things work."

—Bill Stapleton

"It would be a terribly expensive system if all schools were this small, [but] I'm glad my kids are here."

—Denis Fast

"The teachers have made the difference. Most of them really worry about you. There are a lot of people who ... couldn't do things [at a larger school]. It would bring their self-esteem down."

—Jamie Teachout

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shrink 24 percent—a loss of $151,206 this year and $194,335 in the 1994-95 school year.

By the 1995-96 school year, Perrydale will be essentially bankrupt.

Caught in this double bind, the district could view the handwriting on the wall as an overwhelming obstacle and begin plans to merge with another district; there are several within a 10- or 15-mile radius. An elementary school, for example, could remain on the current site, with high school students being sent to a larger school elsewhere.

But such a scenario underestimates the iron will of a school board made up almost entirely of farmers who've lived through their share of hard times. It also doesn't take into account the desires of the most dynamic figure in Perrydale—its superintendent/principal, a whirling dervish named Tim Adsit.

Adsit arrived in 1990, the year Measure 5 passed and the year before the school-improvement act became law. The farmers acknowledge that Adsit, a big man with big energy and big ideas, is the key to saving the district.

Adsit, who came to Perrydale from the 2,400-student Crook County district in central Oregon, summarizes the board's mandate: "There will be a quality small school of excellence here five years from now. Do whatever it takes to accomplish that."

So, taking board members at their word, Adsit has gotten creative, coming up with a detailed plan to increase revenue. The proposals range from welcoming boarding students from other districts to creating a parks-and-recreation district to take over such programs as sports and art.

The revenue from all such efforts combined might bring in the roughly $200,000 extra a year the district needs to maintain an even keel.

The community's will is a factor, too. The idea of losing their school pains residents, not simply because of nostalgia, but because they feel it offers a sound education.

And they're not the only ones who think so. Perrydale received glowing compliments from state education officials who performed an evaluation last year.

"Perrydale school district is a model for other small school districts," the evaluators wrote. "Where many small districts do not take advantage of their smallness to benefit the students and the community, Perrydale has done so. Many instances were found of quality programs that outshine those in large districts with more resources."

This small school is not without its drawbacks, however. Some parents note the lack of advanced courses and wish that less emphasis were placed on athletics. But many at Perrydale believe the individual attention and other benefits of a small school are worth any extra expense or effort to preserve it.

"A good-quality education may cost a little more than running [students] through a factory," says teacher and parent Kirk Hutchinson.

If they're going to preserve it though, they've got to find more money.

When he explains the challenge before the district, Adsit doesn't mince words: "We're fighting for our very survival."

"[The board said] there will be a quality small school of excellence here five years from now. Do whatever it takes to accomplish that."

—Tim Adsit

If the shrinking funding hits Perrydale any harder psychologically than other places, maybe it's because the community had taken so much pride in conservative fiscal practices.

The district was so frugal that it built a 6,200-square-foot addition to the school several years ago for $215,000 without floating a bond issue. Astonishingly, it had never, in its more than 110 years, gone into bonded indebtedness until last year, when voters backed a $150,000 bond for capital-improvement projects, including new roofing and computers.

And Perrydale voters had long been willing to raise their property taxes to support the school. In fact, they levied some of the highest rates in the state, at $21.03 per $1,000 valuation in 1990-91, the year before Measure 5 took effect.

But such largess by the voters and prudent fiscal planning couldn't avert the current crisis. Perrydale residents couldn't predict that a statewide taxpayer revolt in 1990 would change all the rules.

Voters had defeated variations on California's Proposition 13 five times between 1978 and 1986, but a growing frustration with taxes finally swept in Measure 5.

Oregon does not have a sales tax, and for decades, state services have been funded through income taxes while local government, community colleges, and schools have been financed through property taxes.

The property-tax system was inequitable, leading to well-funded schools in districts lucky enough to be wealthy in property and less-well-off schools in property-poor districts that struggled along despite tax rates that often were higher.

Measure 5, which took effect in July 1991, equalizes the property-tax rates around the state, and ratchets that flat rate down by $2.50 per $1,000 of assessed value each year for five years, gradually tightening the noose around Perrydale's neck.

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In the first year of Measure 5's implementation, 1991-92, the property-tax rate was lowered to $15 per $1,000. This year it's $10 per $1,000, and in 1995-96 it will stand at $5 per $1,000 of value.

That means that by 1995-96, Perrydale's school tax rate will be about one-quarter of the amount per $1,000 valuation that was levied in 1990-91. (It is true, though, that the total amount brought in by school property taxes will probably not drop at that rate, since properties are now being assessed at closer to true market value.)

It's not just the schools that lose revenue under Measure 5. The law also lowers the local-government tax rate to $10 per $1,000, for a total local property-tax rate by 1995-96 of $15 per $1,000.

The good news should be that Measure 5 also requires the state to replace the property-tax money lost by local schools, regional education agencies, and community colleges during the five-year phase-in period. In 1991-93, the state replaced $467 million in local school and community-college property taxes. In 1993-95, that figure is expected to balloon to $1.57 billion.

However, the catch for districts like Perrydale is that the measure does not force the state to give each district the amount of money it lost due to the property-tax cutback; rather, it must replace the total amount lost statewide, according to Walter Koscher, the coordinator for school-finance information at the state education department.

So, instead of Perrydale getting back exactly what it lost in local property taxes, it and other districts receive state monies according to a formula based on such characteristics as the number of students who are poor or need special education or instruction in English as a second language.

Because of that distribution system, not every district has a Perrydale-like tragedy to tell. For some districts, Measure 5's equalization effect has made for better times. About 100 of the state's 277 districts saw at least a 20 percent increase in funding in 1992-93, Koscher says.

In addition, there is nothing in Measure 5 to keep the state from shrinking basic general-fund aid to districts, which it has done, although total state spending for K-12 education is up $35 million this year over last. Where the districts get stuck is that the $35 million increase is tantamount to level funding—that is, not enough of an increase to keep pace with inflation—at a time when they are losing property-tax revenue.

Since Measure 5 was enacted, schools statewide have realized a shortfall in property-tax revenue of $540 million.

To try to improve the dire financial situation, parent groups last year pushed for a 5 percent sales tax that would have generated about $387 million over the next two years for the schools.

Gov. Barbara Roberts backed the tax, which would have gone exclusively to education and have been discontinued after four years unless voters agreed to extend it.

Last November, state voters rejected the measure by a three-to-one margin.

"It wouldn't have been a boon to school districts," Koscher says of the sales tax, "but it probably would've been an acceptable compromise."

"Right now," he adds, "the light at the end of the tunnel has been turned off."

Perrydale is already feeling the pain of declining revenues. Rita Montgomery, the school's 3rd-grade teacher, bemoans the age of textbooks. Volumes that should be no more than five years old are six to 15 years out of date, she says.

A lean budget also means field trips are fewer and further between, often paid for when the children hawk pepperoni sticks or other items to parents and neighbors.

The school's librarian, Bob Russell, reports his book budget this year plummeted from $3,000 to $1,000. "It doesn't take long to spend that kind of money," he says.

To make up for some of the things the school can't afford, many teachers estimated they spend $400 to $600 a year of their own money on supplies, storybooks, party food, or props and costumes for school plays.

Just in time for this year's Christmas show, music teacher Connie Biddinger discovered she didn't have enough recorders for her students to play in the production. So she went out and bought some—with her own money.

When Tim Adsit first became aware of such practices last year, he polled the teachers to find out how much they were spending. "I was appalled," he recalls. "That's criminal that they should have to reach into their own pockets."

In the long hallway of the school's eight-classroom elementary wing, photos of past graduating classes line the walls.

They are not the usual large photos of row-upon-row of miniaturized grins, but matted collages of head-and-shoulders portraits.

The pictures could be of any baby-boom-era family of six or eight or 10 children. Instead, they are an entire 12th-grade class.

At 17 students, this year's senior class is rather large compared with those of recent years.

Class sizes in the elementary grades hover around 20, and the 9th grade is the mammoth one on campus with 30 members.

Such small classes mean you can't be too picky about your friends or get wrapped up in cliques—a life lesson that's worth learning early, one mother of alumni remarks.

It also means there's a lot of individual attention and a feeling of trust that many larger schools lack.

An elementary teacher calls the home of each student in her class if school is unexpectedly closed, and truant teenagers get tracked down and picked up at the Salem mall by their teacher.

In the high school wing, unattended hallway lockers stand unlocked or swung open. One open locker even has a costly leather jacket casually slung over the door.

This kind of trust, Adsit offers, is indicative of the "sense of family" among the students and faculty.

Teachers think nothing of donating their own time to some educational pursuits, for example.

Connie Biddinger, for instance, teaches not only middle-grades mathematics, music, and language arts but also elementary music and

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physical education, for a total of six periods a day. Still, early each Tuesday morning, she picks up several high school students for a voluntary before-school vocal-ensemble class.

And homecoming—held in February for basketball season—is a multigenerational event, teenagers sharing the dance floor with their little brothers and sisters and grandparents.

Such an environment is attractive to many parents and students and even lures them from outside the district.

Enrollment grew this year by about 20 percent, or 45 students. Seventy-three students, or about 30 percent of the student body, come from outside the district under the state's open-enrollment law.

By many different criteria, the education offered at Perrydale is a solid one—especially in the lower grades.

On the 1993 Oregon Statewide Assessment Program, given to students in grades 3, 5, 8, and 11, Perrydale students scored slightly above average to well above average at all grade levels.

In writing, Perrydale students were above average except at grades 3, where scores were average, and 11, where performance was slightly below average. On the math assessment, scores were above average in all grades except for grade 11, where they were slightly below average.

On last year's California Achievement Test, given to 2nd through 11th graders, six of the 10 grade levels scored slightly or significantly above the median, while four were below the national median percentile.

In its evaluation report last year, the state education department's team praised the school's elementary-grades Chapter 1 program for mainstreaming students in regular classrooms rather than pulling them out for help.

The report also praised the middle-grades program. "The district has the most important ingredient in developing good middle-level programs—caring adults who develop ongoing helping relationships with kids."

The evaluators also found the Future Farmers of America program—ranked number one in Oregon and one of the best in the nation—"impressive for a small school competing against much larger districts."

The annual dropout rate of about 2 percent to 4 percent is also way below that of the county or the state.

Parents and students at the school praise the individual attention and the lack of behavior problems so rampant in larger schools.

For Loretta Van Leerdam, Perrydale's smaller classes offer a welcome alternative to the bigger schools in nearby Amity, where she and her family live.

Her four children—an 8th grader, 5th-grade twins, and a 1st grader—are in their second school year at Perrydale.

Before they transferred to Perrydale, the twins were in a class of 30 to 35 students and, as a result, "they tended to sort of slip to the bottom," Van Leerdam says. She believes the small classes at Perrydale have made a difference.

"I think it's a caring environment," she says. "The classrooms are decent-sized, and the kids get the attention they need."

Denis Fast, who is a Perrydale alumnus, current parent, and a counselor for the Polk County Education Service District who sees at-risk students at three schools, including Perrydale, feels he knows the Perrydale advantage.

In this school, he says, youngsters "can find their spot and they're not stereotyped out of it."

Fast, who works with students who are "falling through the cracks," says that's simply less likely to happen at Perrydale.

He cites as an example the small hullabaloo that erupted that morning at Perrydale when a high school student was suspected of drinking before he arrived at school.

"That probably wouldn't have been caught at another school," Fast says.

Fast, who also trains rodeo horses and owns a cattle ranch, acknowledges, "It would be a terribly expensive system if all schools were this small."

Nonetheless, he says, "I'm glad my kids are here."

Perrydale also offers an academic second chance to students such as Jamie Teachout, a junior.

After the start of her freshman year at nearby 900-student Dallas High School, Jamie says, the principal suggested she try Perrydale since her grades were not good and she was not hanging around with the best crowd.

She didn't like Perrydale at first because she missed her friends, but she quickly came around.

Jamie had been earning C's to F's in those first weeks at Dallas. Now, she's on the honor roll, earning B's and A's, and planning on college.

In a bigger school, she says, you could skip class and "do whatever you wanted." But in Perrydale, "you obviously can't run to McDonald's."

"The teachers have made the difference," she says, "Most of them really worry about you."

At Perrydale it is also easier to make the teams and get more playing time in her sports of volleyball and track.

If Perrydale were to close, Jamie thinks it would be hard for students to switch to a larger school, especially the ones who have been at the school since they were very young. "There are a lot of people who . . . couldn't do things [at a larger school]. It would bring their self-esteem down."

A small school like Perrydale does have its disadvantages. Spanish, the only foreign language, is beamed in by satellite. Football is played with an eight-man team instead of the standard 11. The 6,000-volume library, housed in two classroom-sized rooms, seems fine for elementary grades, but a bit thin for high schoolers.

In many ways, the school cannot match the larger, newer facilities of, say, Dallas High, with its baseball diamonds, theater, student store, and 10,000-volume library.

And while Perrydale attracts a lot of out-of-district students, there are folks who live in the Perrydale district who send their children to the larger area schools, whether for the powerhouse sports teams or wider course offerings.

In a place like Perrydale, students are "not exposed to enough things" academically, says Fast, the alumnus and counselor.

"The highly brilliant student is the handicapped student" here, he says.

Ralph and Jean Chapin, a local farmer and a substitute teacher, respectively, seem to agree.

The Chapins, who live across from the school's football field, have had two children go on to college after attending Perrydale. They have high praise for the teachers and the leadership skills instilled through the strong F.F.A. chapter.

But, as college graduates themselves, they feel there is too much emphasis on sports (pressure on students to join teams in order to have enough players is enormous) and that academic preparation for college-bound students is inadequate.

The curriculum is "really geared to the average student," Jean Chapin says.

Their son, a freshman at the University of Portland majoring in mechanical engineering, found he did not have enough background in math and computer use and is now having to work with tutors to catch up to his classmates.

A college junior focusing on liberal arts at Linfield College in nearby McMinnville, their daughter also felt she was not well prepared in literature and writing.

In the minds of many members of the Perrydale community—and certainly in the minds of board members and Tim Adsit—a program that's working, whatever its weaknesses, deserves to be saved. Especially when its potential demise is not their fault.

Adsit, for one, is relentlessly optimistic. "There are no problems," he often says with a grin. "Just challenges and opportunities."

Another optimist is Bill Stapleton, the school board chairman, who raises grass seed, wheat, and cherries on about 1,500 acres. Stapleton explains the community's attitude toward saving the district.

"The board is made up of hardheaded, tough-minded farmers," he says. "We've all seen tough times, and we just roll up our sleeves and make things work."

"Somehow, somewhere, there's got to be a way to work through this," he says.

Stapleton, who has three daughters in the school, says he figures if Perrydale can just weather the next five to seven years, the school-finance system will probably have changed because of its drastic effect on schools.

"I assume the whole state will say, 'Enough is enough.' "

But he speaks somberly of the challenge of trying to "upgrade and increase" in the face of the 1991 school-reform legislation at a time when money is scarcer than scarce.

Among other reforms, the education-reform act increases public accountability in schools, establishes site-based school-improvement councils, and creates new standards of student achievement.

It also lengthens the current 175-day school calendar to 185 days by 1996, 200 days in 2000, and 220 days in 2010.

Meeting such requirements will be extremely difficult, if not impossible, for Perrydale on its current budget.

"And, yet," Stapleton says, "you can't stand still either."

Advanced technology, he notes, is changing the way farmers like himself have worked for generations. He just installed a $1,500 computer on his "swamp buggy" farm vehicle that will disperse the exact amounts of pesticides and fertilizers his crops need given the terrain and the vehicle's speed.

"These kids," he says, about two-thirds of whom go on to college, "have got to be ready for the 21st century."

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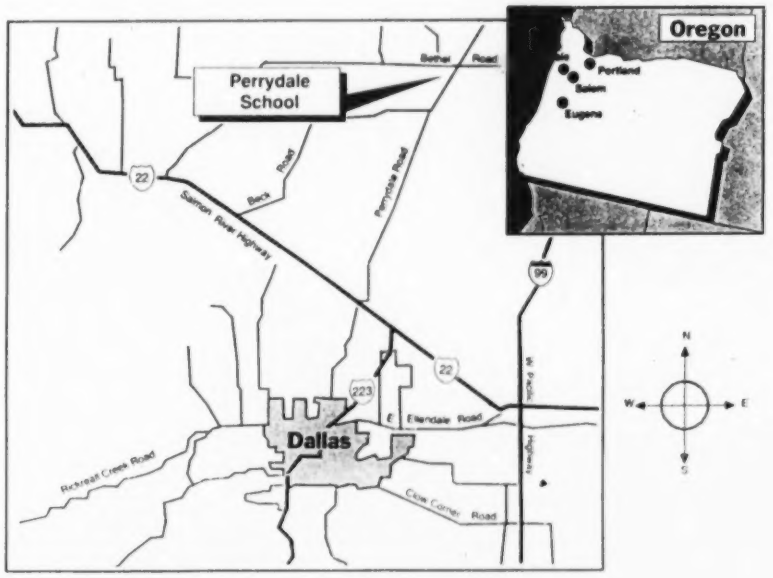

Adsit says he sees three broad ways in which the future of the school district can be assured: having the school help with local economic development, using the community in its curriculum, and providing integrated social services at the school site.

Students already use skills learned in language-arts and computer classes to produce a district and community newsletter. And the integrated social-services site is also in the works thanks to a state pilot program.

Together, the other 15 proposed revenue-producing options the district is weighing "have the potential to not only save the district but also to place [it] at the very forefront of providing a quality education for Perrydale's students well into the 21st century," Adsit says.

Some of the options have already become a reality.

The district has set up a nonprofit foundation that can accept charitable contributions, such as the $100 a not-so-wealthy parent sent Montgomery, the veteran teacher.

As much as $2,000 has been collected so far from such events as bingo, and the school plans to become much more aggressive about fund-raising.

The district has also entered into partnerships with several local businesses. A local cable-television company has wired the school free of charge to receive satellite transmissions. And the local State Farm insurance office has given the district surplus computers, chairs, and blackboards at discount rates.

The idea of increasing the number of out-of-district students is still being explored. The current 73 nonresident students generate about $4,000 each in state funding, totaling nearly $300,000 a year for Perrydale. That amounts to about one-fifth of its budget.

The district may begin a boarding-school program in which local families would play host to out-of-district students. Nine families have already expressed interest in the proposal.

Such a plan would have to balance the increased revenues against the potential loss of low teacher-student ratios and the other features of a small school that draw people in the first place, Adsit acknowledges.

At each turn of deciding the district's future, the board and Adsit have involved the community and school staff, whether through a formal survey or town meetings. It was through the latter, for example, that district officials learned the community was not interested in a four-day school week, despite its money-saving promise.

Late last year, the school board set up a strategic planning/futures committee made up of board members, teachers, and parents.

One idea the panel has expressed interest in is establishing a parks-and-recreation district—an option that Adsit says has the greatest potential to significantly ease the budget pinch.

Such a district would have boundaries identical to those of the school district and would be supported by a share of the local nonschool taxes.

The parks district could then contract with the school district to provide a wide variety of courses and services including art, music, vocational agriculture, physical education, outdoor education, environmental science, home economics, and interscholastic athletics.

The savings to the school from such an arrangement could run some $166,000 a year, or more than 10 percent of its current annual budget.

With all of Adsit's ideas, bulldog tenacity, and boundless energy, many say Perrydale already owes a great debt to the superintendent. He's a "planner and a doer," Stapleton says of Adsit. "We would not be where we are today without Tim."

Adsit has helped what Stapleton half-jokingly describes as a "bunch of dumb farmers" think creatively about new sources of revenue for the school district. They didn't know anything about how to set up an educational foundation, he says, but Adsit did.

Adsit also made sure a couple of busloads of Perrydale residents showed up at a recent state hearing to push for some special "small school" funding for Perrydale. After much wrangling, Perrydale won a two-year spot in the legislation, entitling it to about $80,000 a year beyond regular funding.

A few miles before the Perrydale Road turnoff on Highway 22 there is a parking area where, between the passing whoosh of cars and logging trucks, you can just make out the honking of wild geese.

Over the marshy field before you spreads Baskett Slough National Wildlife Refuge, a 2,492-acre winter home for the dusky Canada goose.

It is to the Willamette Valley, and to the lower Columbia River, that virtually the entire population of Canada geese returns each winter from its spring and summer nesting grounds in the Copper River Delta in southeastern Alaska.

This refuge and two others like it elsewhere in the valley did not exist before the mid-1960's. At that time, farms and urban sprawl were eating up the precious wintering spots, and the numbers of geese were declining. The Canada goose became the unintended victim of human encroachment.

The federal government decided to protect the birds and their territory. But to raise the funds to buy the land for the refuges, it had to sell "duck" stamps—a creative and, ultimately, successful strategy.

Four miles away, the Perrydale school community has made a similar decision to save something worthwhile. The unintended victim of a taxpayer revolt, it sees its days dwindling.

Now, Tim Adsit and his board members have rolled up their sleeves and invented some ways to raise the revenue they need.

If they can pull it off, students will be able to return to their educational haven, September after September. ■

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